

# **Oradour-sur-Glane**

## **Synopsis of the Official Story of Oradour-sur-Glane**

Around 2 p.m. on 10 June 1944, four days after the Allied invasion of Normandy, approximately 150 Waffen-SS soldiers entered the tranquil village of Oradour-sur-Glane in the Limosin region of south central France. For no apparent reason, Hitler's elite troops destroyed every building in this peaceful village and brutally murdered a total of 642 innocent men, women and children, an unexplained tragedy which has gone down in history as one of the worst war crimes committed by the German army in World War II.

On that beautiful Summer day, the defenseless inhabitants of Oradour-sur-Glane were rudely dragged out of their homes, including the sick and the elderly, and ordered to assemble on the Fairgrounds on the pretext of checking their identity papers. After all had been assembled, they were forced to wait in suspense with machine guns pointed at them. Then the women were separated from the men and marched a short distance to the small Catholic Church, carrying infants in their arms or pushing them in baby carriages.

The men were then ordered to line up in three rows and face a wall that bordered on the Fairgrounds. A short time later, they were randomly divided into groups and herded into six buildings: barns, garages, a smithy, and a wine storehouse. Around 4 p.m., a loud explosion was heard which was interpreted by the men to be a signal for the SS soldiers to begin firing their machine guns. Most of the men were wounded in the legs and then burned alive when every building in the village was set on fire at around 5 p.m. By some miracle, 6 of the men managed to escape from one of the burning barns and 5 of them survived. They testified in court about this completely unjustified German barbarity against blameless French civilians.

The Oradour church only had a seating capacity of 350 persons, but 245 frightened women and 207 sobbing children were forced inside at gunpoint while the men were still sitting on the grass of the Fairgrounds, awaiting their fate. The women and children were locked inside the church while the SS soldiers systematically looted all the homes in this prosperous farming village. Then around 4 p.m. a couple of SS soldiers carried a gas bomb inside this holy place and set it off, filling the church with a cloud of noxious black smoke. Their intention had been to asphyxiate the women and children in the House of God, but their plan failed.

As the women and children pressed against the doors, trying to escape and struggling to breathe, SS soldiers then entered the crowded, smoke-filled church and fired hundreds of shots at the hapless victims, while other SS men stood outside ready to machine-gun anyone who attempted to escape. The soldiers fired low inside the church in order to hit the small children. Babies in their prams were blown up by hand grenades, filled with gas, that were tossed into the church. Then brushwood and straw was carried into the stone church and piled on top of the writhing bodies of those that were not yet dead. The church was then set on fire, burning alive the women and babies who had only been wounded by the shots and the grenades. The clamour coming from the church could be heard for a distance of two kilometers, according the Bishop's office report.

The fire inside the church was so intense that the flames leaped up into the bell tower; the bronze church bells melted from the heat of the flames and fell down onto the floor of the church. One SS soldier was accidentally killed by falling debris when the roof of the church steeple collapsed.

Only one woman, a 47-year-old grandmother, escaped from the church. Taking advantage of a cloud of smoke, she hid behind the main altar where she found a ladder that had been left there for the purpose of lighting the candles on the altar. Madame Marguerite Rouffanche, the lone survivor of the massacre in the church, managed to escape by using the ladder to climb up to a broken window behind the altar, then leaping out of the window, which was 9 feet from the ground. Although hit by machine gun fire and wounded 4 times in the legs and once in the shoulder, she was able to crawl to the garden behind the presbytery where she hid among the rows of peas until she was rescued, 24 hours later, at 5 p.m. the next day, and taken to the hospital in Limoges where she was admitted under an assumed name. It took a full year for her to recover from her wounds. In 1953, she testified before a French military tribunal in Bordeaux about the massacre of the women and children in the church.